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In the Parliament

Proceedings of the 44th Parliament

The House of Commons and the Senate reconvened on Tuesday, November 22 and will adjourn for a five week break on Friday, December 17. The Throne Speech that opened Parliament is still on the agenda, with an amendment tabled by the Conservatives and amended by the Bloc stating that the speech “fails to adequately address critical issues that threaten the prosperity of Canadians.” They wish to have the cost of living, inflation, the stagnant economy, the housing crisis, the labour shortage, and the “national unity crisis” be added to it.

The proceedings have seen 120 reports for the year ending March 2021, from various government agencies and departments, tabled and referred to various House Committees. These include information about the hundreds of Orders-in-Council that have been issued by the Cabinet, ranging from restrictions on travelers entering the country; foreign relations, such as Regulations Amending the Special Economic Measures (Belarus) Regulations; to appointments to agencies and departments made at the pleasure of the Liberals. Also included are departmental reports such as “Departmental Sustainable Development Strategy Interim Report for the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food for 2020-2021.” Most of the reports are not readily obtainable by the public and whether they are read by the members of the House of Commons is doubtful.



The House of Commons also received reports from the Officers of Parliament which have supplanted ministerial reporting and accountability. Gone are the days when ministers were expected to deliver reports on their ministries. The Privacy Commissioner, the Commissioner of Lobbying,

the Auditor-General and the various commissioners within that office have submitted reports which are made public immediately, such as the report of the Commissioner of the Environment and Sustainability which concluded that Canada is “the worst performer of all G7 countries” in meeting its commitments to reduce emissions. These reports provided grist for the scandal-mill, with talking-point writers for Liberal MPs and opposition critics providing 15-second sound bites which either discredit or affirm the findings presented. This is done on a self-serving selective basis. The report of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, for instance, informed that its budget needs to be increased because of the work involved in costing parties’ electoral platforms but MPs found no issue with this expansion of public funding for the cartel party system.

On December 14, Finance Minister Freeland will deliver her Fiscal and Economic Update for the current year.

Senate Proceedings

In the Senate, eight new members were sworn in. Government Representative Marc Gold told his fellow senators that counting the new members, “we form a club that has sworn in only 998 members in the last 154 years.” He suggested that their background and talents would “contribute to continuing this chamber’s role as a representative and thoughtful voice for all Canadians.”

There are currently 13 vacancies in the 105 member Senate. Their groupings have become difficult to comprehend. Six identify themselves as “non-affiliated,” 42 identify as the “Independent Senators Group,” 18 are in the Conservative Party Group, 14 are in the “Progressive Senators Group” and 12 are in the “Canadian Senators Group.”

Thirty-three bills have been tabled in the Senate.

Legislation Before Parliament

The House of Commons has received seven Government bills, the first being the pro-forma Bill C-1 which is not voted on and is said to be an expression of the rights and privileges of members of the Commons to address any matter they choose.

Pandemic Relief Measures

Bill C-2, “*An Act to provide further support in response to COVID-19*” was tabled on November 24 and was referred to the Standing Committee on Finance on December 2. It ends the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) and introduces a \$300/week Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit for workers affected by a total local lockdown. It will run until May 7, 2022 and is retroactive to October 2021. Benefits for individuals who cannot work because of COVID-19 related sickness or caregiving situations have also been extended until May, and the period of coverage has been extended by two weeks.

Employer wage subsidies are also extended to May, with the rate of subsidy increased to 50 per cent. This is said to be aimed at encouraging businesses to rehire workers, increase their hours and “create the additional jobs Canada needs for a full recovery from the COVID-19 recession.”

Bill C-2 provides two new funding programs targeting the tourism and hospitality sectors, covering hotels, restaurants and travel agencies, for which eligibility requires significant revenue declines year over year and in the month of application. The government reports that in 2020, revenues in the tourism industry declined almost 50 per cent, from \$104.4 billion to \$53.4 billion, while related jobs decreased 41 per cent, from 692,000 to 409,000. The government states that “the Canadian economy

will not fully recover until the tourism sector recovers.”

Another program is described as “the hardest-hit business recovery program,” available to all sectors where “deep and enduring losses” have been experienced. The wage and rent subsidy for these businesses would start at a 10 per cent subsidy for a 50 per cent loss of revenue, up to 50 per cent for businesses that have experienced a decline in revenue of 75 per cent or more.

Opposition to Bill C-2 has centred on the absence of measures to support self-employed individuals in the arts, culture, travel and tourism sectors and the failure of the government to rescind the clawback of old-age security payments for seniors. Many seniors received CERB payments that put their income over the threshold to qualify for supplemental payments, but were never told that this would be the case. Bill C-2 gives the Cabinet regulatory powers such as deciding under what conditions workers will qualify for benefits resulting from localized shutdowns.

A feature of the House of Commons deliberation on Bill C-2 is the failure to consider the consequences of the pandemic on the conditions of Canadians beyond work disruptions and remedial income for those situations. There is a lot of talk about the impossible situation of many Canadians not being able to make ends meet. Even as Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland blames the pandemic for the soaring cost of living, no measures are being considered to address this problem.

Medical Sick Leave for Federally Regulated Employees and Criminalization of Protests in the Health Sector

Bill C-3, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code and Labour Code*, has been referred to Committee after Second reading. It amends the *Criminal Code* to create offences related to intimidation, obstruction, and interference at health service locations. For some time, tensions caused as a result of lack of adequate numbers of personnel to deal with patients have been ignored and instead treated on a law and order basis. This is now extended to protests that have occurred at hospitals by people opposed to government vaccination regimes.

It also provides for ten days of yearly medical leave for federally regulated employees, while authorizing the Cabinet to make changes to the provisions through regulations. It was referred to Committee on December 9 after unanimous support at second reading.

Conversion Therapy Criminalization

Bill C-4, *An Act to Amend the Criminal Code (Conversion Therapy)* has gone through the House of Commons and the Senate and received Royal Assent on December 8. It amends the Criminal Code to make it a crime to cause another person to undergo therapies aimed at changing their sexual preference or orientation. It includes a ban on all conversion therapy advertising, and on anyone receiving any financial or other material benefit from the provision of the service. Courts are authorized to order the take-down of any related advertising.

Minimum Mandatory Sentencing Repeal

Bill C-5, *An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act*, re-introduces legislation that was aborted in prior sessions of the Justin Trudeau Ministry, the last time being in February 2021. It is said to be a fulfillment of Trudeau’s 2015 promise to reverse former Prime Minister Harper’s mandatory minimum sentences and to allow for greater use of conditional sentencing and other measures for simple drug possession offences.

In introducing the legislation, Justice Minister David Lametti referred to the over-representation of

Black and Indigenous people in Canadian prisons, saying that even though Indigenous adults make up five per cent of the population, they comprise 30 per cent of inmates. He blamed the “Conservative justice policy.” Critics question why the Liberals have allowed this injustice to continue for so long since it came to power.

The legislation has been reintroduced at a time when various cities and provinces are calling for the decriminalization of possession of small amounts of drugs in the context of the opioid crisis. BC saw a record 1,782 people die of drug overdoses in the first ten months of 2021. Overdose has become the leading cause of death for people aged 19 to 39 and the second leading cause for people aged 40 to 59. The demand for decriminalization is aimed at creating a situation where users are not stigmatized and discouraged from seeking help for fear of being charged.

Budgets, Economic Updates, Spending Bills and Accountability

The suggestion that public spending is approved by Parliament is becoming increasingly hard to believe. On December 9, the House of Commons fast-tracked Treasury Board Minister Monica Fortier’s Bill C-6, *An Act for granting to Her Majesty certain sums of money for the federal public administration for the fiscal year ending March 31, 2022* through to its adoption at third reading without a word of discussion on it. The Commons turned itself into a Committee of the Whole to do so, with Conservative MPs voting against.

The Bill authorizes an additional \$8.7 billion for expenses for the fiscal year. It has now gone to the Senate, where a pre-study on the additional spending has been conducted by its Finance Committee. The \$8.7 billion is for expenses “not otherwise accounted for,” but “deemed to have been authorized” in April 2021 when the lower estimates were provided.

The President of the Treasury Board appeared along with departmental staff and the Parliamentary Budget Officer, Yves Giroux, before the Senate Finance Committee. Giroux expressed concern that the additional funds were being requested without the government having provided an accounting of how over \$600 billion was spent for the year ending March 2021. This concern was augmented by one Senator who said that even the information that is provided is extremely difficult to navigate and understand.

Bill C-7, *An Act to amend the Parliament of Canada Act and to make consequential and related amendments to other Acts*, tabled on December 10, provides for funds for the leaders of the Senate groupings that have been created since the claim that Senate appointments are no longer party-related was made by the Liberals. Similar legislation has been tabled in the Senate.

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